

Sabrina Stetee
Trustee, Boulder

Nov. 17, 2011

This is my 7th year on our elementary board and my 4th year on our high school board.

I grew up in Boulder and attend school there from kindergarten through high school graduation. We realized the other day that my 7th grade daughter might actually be sitting in the same desk I sat in for Math 39 years ago. There are three little hearts carved in the edge of the desk and I think I might have been responsible for them. My husband is from Michigan and we lived there for a number of years before moving home to Boulder nine years ago. My business is still located in Michigan, an employment, agency, I currently employ over 600 people and do about 13 million a year in revenue. Thanks to technology, I am able to run my business in Michigan from my home in Boulder with very little travel back and forth.

I believe that that the greatest challenge facing our school is implementing what we know works. We know in education that using data to drive decision making works. We know assessing performance and tailoring instruction to the assessments every day works. We know working with every individual kid closely throughout high school on preparing for college and work works. But we aren't doing the things that we know work. So the question is why not? If we know what it takes to have high performing schools and students, why don't we just do it? The behavioral answer is that we want other things more. We want the safety of saying what we've always done is right more than we want the uncertainty of moving toward something new. We want time with our families more than we want evenings studying new ways of teaching. We want peace and quiet with our colleagues more than we want loud messy conversations about how best to change our practice. We want to remain in control of what we teach more than we want to measure the learning we were able to instill in our students.

As leaders and managers of people, we know that our job is to lead people to want to do what we need them to do and that we do that by removing barriers and providing incentive. As trustees, we need to help create an environment in which our administration and staff will feel safe in trying new ways of teaching. We need to provide time for teacher development to take place without undermining our teacher's time for their families and lives. We need to demonstrate that loud messy discussions can be held but we can all be friends and colleagues still. And maybe most important, we need to put the structure and supports in place that teachers need in order to let go of control and embrace change.

What prevents us as trustees from doing this? In my experience so far, the biggest barrier is knowledge. There is no clear and precise go-to place to learn what we should do to improve our schools, what's best in education, what's best for our kids. The next barrier is lack of confidence. We hesitate to question our administrators or teachers even in the face of low student achievement because we ourselves don't feel we have the answers. And the third barrier is being distracted by other issues, being pulled in so many different directions that we are not able to maintain focus on student achievement.

How can the Legislature help and support the local district in overcoming these barriers?

I have two thoughts on this and they contradict each other.

EDUCATION AND LOCAL GOV'T
November 17, 2011
EXHIBIT 11

no more
inclusion
action
we need
people
in the schools
reports to
board of
superintendents

ACT
by 11th
grade
to be
in third
kindergarten
we can
have it
to improve
future
but to
that kind
no for
late

we need
improvement every year
at the level of the ACT
K-8
we need
11th
grade

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The first thought is that it is not about the money, it is about the smell of money. We can improve our schools without more funding. With good instruction, we can teach kids sitting in the dirt with a sack of pebbles and a stick. What we can't do is focus with laser precision on teaching and instruction if we must be involved in wrangling about money, chasing the smell of money, every two years and most of the months in between. I think of the conflict during the legislative sessions over education funding as being like parents arguing in front of their kids. It hurts the kids more than you realize. Wonder and worry about funding creates conflict, it creates divisions among our schools. It tears our communities apart. It brings tension and difficulty to the relationship between trustees, administration, and teachers. Even if it does not mean an increase in funding, and I know I could be shot for saying that, the single biggest thing the legislature can do for education is to stabilize the funding structure for schools.

My second thought, and here's the conflict, is that it is about the money. We have learned what works in education, we know how to increase student achievement. Unfortunately what we learned is that what works is taking the time to assess each kid individually, to team teach, to have teachers coaching other, to have teachers cross-train and cross-grade. Our old system of having one teacher lecture to 40 high school students every hour is not effective. Our teachers can't be responsible for 100-150 students every day and have time to work with the kids and with each other in the way that we know works. To do what we know works, we have to free up time for teacher training and collaboration. This means more teachers, more instructional leaders and coaches, more money.

My final thought is that I think sometimes we have become so focused on doing things for the least possible amount of money that we stop even thinking about what would be possible if we were well funded. What if we could afford to hire not just one counselor but two so that every one of our high school kids could work one on one with a counselor developing a path of education and exploration and community service from their first day of high school through graduation that is tied to their interests and goals. What if we could afford to have robust art and music programs that integrated with our reading and math programs because we know these connections exist and lead to better and deeper learning? What if we could put a computer in the hands of every single student? What if we could afford to take our kids to the heart of our democracy, to see our nation's capital and feel the history of our country? We don't even consider these things because we know we can do nothing more than dream about bringing that kind of opportunity to our kids. I think our conversation must shift from how little can we spend in our schools to how much opportunity can we create for our kids.

The colonies had grown up under constitutions of government so different, there was so great a variety of religions, they were composed of so many different nations, their customs, manners, and habits had so little resemblance, and their intercourse had been so rare, and their knowledge of each other so imperfect, that to unite them in the same principles in theory and the same system of action, was certainly a very difficult enterprise. The complete accomplishment of it, in so short a time and by such simple means, was perhaps a singular example in the history of mankind. Thirteen clocks were made to strike together—a perfection of mechanism, which no artist had ever before effected.

John Adams to Hezekiah Niles, 13 February 1818
Works of John Adams, 10:283

I must study Politicks and War that my sons may have liberty to study Mathematicks and Philosophy. My sons ought to study Mathematicks and Philosophy, Geography, natural History, Naval Architecture, navigation, Commerce and Agriculture, in order to give their Children a right to study Painting, Poetry, Musick, Architecture, Statuary, Tapestry and Porcelaine.

John Adams to Abigail Adams, [post 12 May 1780]
Adams Family Correspondence, 3:342